Equality of Access to Post-Secondary Education in Newfoundland and Labrador

A paper presented to

Rotary International
Newfoundland Hotel
St. John's, Newfoundland
April 15, 1982

by

Dr. G. Llewellyn Parsons
Professor of Education
Department of Educational Administration
Memorial University of Newfoundland

The North American Philosophy Regarding Education of Youth

The generally accepted norm in North America today is for universal public education at the elementary, secondary, and, as far as resources will permit, at the post-secondary level so that our young people can acquire the knowledge, skills, and abilities to lead useful and productive lives. The aim, then, of public education and the responsibility of public educational authorities is to educate and develop not segments of society but to develop the talents and abilities of "all sorts and conditions of men." We as educators accept the fact that the Creator invested man with varying talents, abilities, and aptitudes. So that <u>all</u> may grow and develop, special provisions congruent with these variations must be made. The task (and challenge), then, which has been assigned to education (as a public and social 'good'), is to accept each and every person where he is and develop him as far as possible in terms of his abilities, needs, interests, and talents. This responsibility in public education assumes that opportunities will be provided for all at the elementary, secondary, and post-secondary levels so that each person may be given an opportunity to reach his fullest potential. This philosophy means that not only will every person have a chance to successfully complete secondary school <u>in some form</u> according to his needs and abilities, but also that he will be given the chance to develop his talents and abilities in other stages of education that we designate as post-secondary. This educational stance is based on the belief that every person (child, adolescent, adult, male or female) is 'good' for something, and that through the formal process of education, every person can be educated, trained, and developed to make a worthwhile contribution to society congruent with the potential that the Creator has provided him. In my own personal experience as a teacher and

administrator, I can honestly say that I have never met a student who wasn't 'good' for something, but, I can also say that there have been many occasions when the educational system has denied to persons access to the opportunities they needed to develop the talents and aptitudes they possessed. You and I see great merits in this land we call Newfoundland and Labrador, although sometimes we justifiably complain about the lack of development of our resources. I believe that there is little wrong with this Province that cannot be rectified by giving our young people access to the training and education they need to develop the resources of this great country - Canada.

In developing our young people in Canada, the overriding goals of secondary and post-secondary education appear to be a search for objectivity and truth, the development of creativity, that is, a seeking spirit, the engendering of social commitment, and the growth of the 'complete man' - physically, intellectually, spiritually, and emotionally. Coupled with these goals is a concern for the development of the knowledge and skills needed to lead a productive life in the world of work. To achieve these goals, secondary schools are becoming (and must become) more and more comprehensive in nature in that they offer academic, vocational, technical, commercial, aesthetic, fine arts, and work-study programs to match the varying needs, interests, and abilities of students. In the revision of high school programs and the introduction of Grade Twelve in this Province, you are evidencing a move towards this comprehensiveness. Even though the steps may appear slow at first, eventually you will see a broadening of programs to meet the needs of all who are at the secondary phase of development. It is hoped that in the years ahead, every person in this Province will successfully complete high school in some form commensurate with his/her needs, interests, and abilities. The Ministry of Education, the Department of Education, the educational

administrators, the teachers, and the parents of students of this Province should be lauded and praised for these long-overdue innovations, revamping, and revising. With the support of all involved, Newfoundland and Labrador can develop a first-class comprehensive high school program that will do justice to all our youth.

The programs for secondary and post-secondary education must develop for all students the knowledge, the skills, and attitudes that will enable them to effectively deal with the abundant resources that we have in this Province. Acquiring the relevant skills and knowledge in this technological age requires commitment and time on the part of the learner. To be gainfully employed in Newfoundland, our young people will have to accept the fact that they will have to successfully participate in the comprehensive programs of secondary school and proceed to post-secondary to acquire the skills needed to lead a productive and useful life. To enter the labour market prematurely without the necessary preparation is to condemn oneself to a lifetime of unemployment. On the other hand, consider the consequences to society of any post-secondary institution offering relevant courses for which the candidate is qualified and yet rejecting the student because of lack of space and/or facilities. A rejection means a lost opportunity to some youth to enhance the productive life of this Province and Country. Surely the responsibility of the administrators of those public institutions is to <u>accept</u> the applicant where he is in terms of his abilities, interests, and career decisions, and then provide the opportunity to develop his skills and abilities as far as he can go. The costs will be high, but the cost of denying access to our youth will be even higher. Because we are concerned with a Canadian endeavour, all Canadians must be expected to share in the costs of educating its citizens.

The Meaning of Equality of Access To Post-Secondary Education

Equality of access to post-secondary education means giving everyone in the Province a chance to develop his potential in knowledge and skills related to his considered interests and life work which he has considered through the secondary education process, and for which high school has qualified him. This means providing each and every student that is capable of profiting therefrom, an equal chance of access to those educational resources essential to the development of the knowledge and skills which he will need to apply to vocational, technical, commercial, and aesthetic pursuits of living. Those resources will include the necessary space, facilities, teachers, and instructional technologies as well ensuring that the student's basic human needs are met so that he is unencumbered as he attempts to achieve his intellectual and developmental goals.

Some of the elements included in equality of access are:

(a) participation in learning activities free of direct cost to the consumer up to the point of successful acquisition of the skills and knowledge necessary for him to lead a productive life in the world of work.

(b) equality within a locality or region; for example, a person living on the St. Barbe coast having the same chance to pursue relevant educational training at the post-secondary level as a person living in Grand Falls or St. John's.

(c) provision of diverse courses and programs appropriate to the student's career choice.

(d) flexible admissions standards which, while guiding him into appropriate areas of learning, do not debar or reject him from an opportunity to develop the talents and abilities which he possesses.

Let it be noted here that these opportunities for access to intellectual and vocational development must come relatively early in life, that is, as soon as possible after the student has successfully completed (in some form) a comprehensive high school program. You here today can appreciate the deleterious effect of placing enthusiastic students on a waiting list for a chance to enhance their knowledge and skills, only to find out much later there is no room or space in the school or college. In such cases students feel embittered and short-changed.

Fortunately for our Canadian society and for Newfoundland in particular, there are forces promoting equality of access to post-secondary education. One force is the changing attitude towards the processes of learning and the nature of man as learner, that is, the flowering of a belief that all men possess potential talent and ability, the development of which can be addressed through our public educational system. Supportive of this attitude is the kindred belief that any concept can be taught in an intellectually honest fashion to any person, at any time, at any age, providing it is taught in a manner and language that the learner can understand. George Bernard Shaw said the difference between a lady and a flower girl is not in how she behaves but in how she is treated. We have to provide different treatment for our students. Varying abilities call for varying treatment. The second force promoting equality of access is industrialization and its concomitant need for technological and industrial expertise. We are witnessing the impact of this factor right now in this Province as we grapple with the problem of developing our hydro, forestry, and petroleum and fishery potential. Unfortunately, however, for this Province, we have never demanded a high level of education and technological expertise for most of our people engaged in what could be a

very viable industry in this Province - that is, the fisheries. Our attitudes towards those involved in fishing must change. A third factor is the faith and belief that, provided with the necessary knowledge and skills, native people can develop and exercise control over their own resources. Finally, Canada Manpower training programs, although having their genesis in and based on the indigenous needs of Central Canada, have had (through federal funding) a tremendous impact upon post-secondary education throughout Canada. The task for this Province now is to evaluate these programs for the purpose of ascertaining how they can be restructured and revised to suit the specific manpower training needs of Newfoundland and Labrador.

However, in spite of these factors promoting equality of access, there are several factors which hinder and militate against equality of access. One of these is the high tolerance of educational inequalities both throughout Canada and within its various regions, especially within Newfoundland and Labrador. It would appear that this indifference or tolerance is based on lack of knowledge as to what is available throughout the country; but, whatever the reason, these inequalities need to be readdressed not in the sense of curtailment of services in those areas that already have them but rather in bringing the have-not areas up to a respectable level of achievement so that our youth can acquire the knowledge and skills necessary for them to lead productive and useful lives.

The second factor militating against equality of access in this Province has been the lack of a comprehensive, long-term plan for post-secondary education. With all the innovations of the fifties, the sixties, and the seventies impacting upon us, Newfoundlanders probably never had the time to develop the comprehensive plan that was, and is now, urgently needed. Finally, the disparity among Provinces in their ability to financially support

the kind of post-secondary programs needed has left some Provinces with the urgent need to re-negotiate the sharing of Canadian resources to support viable worthwhile post-secondary programs. In this regard, it is high time for educational planners in this Province to take stock.

A Rationale for the Provision of Post-Secondary Education

In a Province so blessed with bountiful resources: fish, hydro, oil, forest, and minerials, it is paradoxical that employment opportunities are so excruciatingly difficult to obtain, while our resources remain underdeveloped or shipped out as raw materials with very little economic return to the Province. Whereas it is difficult to demonstrate direct causal effects among levels of education, employment, and economic productivity, it is relatively easy to show the indirect relationship that education acts upon the factors of production which, in turn, causes economic productivity. Education, in terms of skills and knowledge developed and applied to the resources, becomes a producer good which changes productivity and employment opportunities. Simply stated, education affects:

(a) the quantity or quality of the capital equipment used

(b) the quality of the effort input

(c) the quantity and quality of the natural resources used

(d) the quality of materials or intermediate products

(e) the administration and organization for productive work, and

(f) the working conditions.

All of these factors, in turn, affect economic productivity. If one were to partial out the best single investment this Province could make for the economic health of Newfoundland and Labrador, the decision would have to be to

provide our young people with the knowledge and skills that they need to wrestle with the bountiful resources of this land. This educational investment can be provided through the reorganization and restructuring of post-secondary education in this Province so that changes in the quality and quantity of the labour force can be effected which will lead to greater employment and a more productive use of the wealth we have. The principles underlying this proposition are similar to those advocated by Gunnar Myrdal, in Economic Theory and Underdeveloped Regions, (Harper and Row, 1965), viz.:

(1) the quality and the quantity of the labour force can be affected through educational provisions for its members by providing the relevant training in knowledge and skills.

(2) the unsatisfied needs of those suffering economic deprivation should be transformed into a demand; and,

(3) that demand should be satisfied by a local supply, thus assuring the development of local employment.

The Picture of Inequality of Access--Enrolments and Participation Rates

The participation rates in post-secondary education in this Province are the lowest among the ten Provinces. Only the Yukon and the North West Territories, with their predominance of native peoples with the attending problem of providing relevant secondary and post-secondary education, have lower participation rates. Whereas the proportion of youth involved in post-secondary education in Newfoundland and Labrador is barely half the Canadian average, the participation rate is barely one-third of that of the Provinces of Ontario and Quebec. The statistics are even more disconcerting when one considers the total participation rates in both secondary and post-secondary education in this Province as compared with total participation rates in Ontario. In that Province not only is the percentage of the 16-29

age group participating in secondary education almost double the percentage of the same age group participating in secondary education in Newfoundland, but also, in addition, the percentage of the 16-35 age group participating in post-secondary education in Ontario is more than double the percentage of this age group participating in education in Newfoundland and Labrador. Not only is this terrible waste through undeveloped human resources in this Province to be deplored, but also a public demand should be created to ensure that steps are taken to correct these inequalities. Probably an investigation into the problem might reveal that enrolments in post-secondary education are static because the number of places and programs available are static and that, in spite of the aspirations and expectations of our young people for preparation for utilization of our resources, many of them really have nowhere to go.

Who Goes Where? - Factors Related to Inequality of Access

In Newfoundland, research data indicate that besides students' perceived knowledge of available places, students' post-secondary plans are influenced by provincial regions, sex, fathers' occupations, parents' level of education and unemployment history, size of family, and other socioeconomic factors. The proportion of students from the Avalon Peninsula population proceeding to university is three times the proportion of the student population from outside the Avalon going to university. A relatively small proportion of the students on the Avalon Peninsula attend the college of Fisheries or the vocational schools as compared with the percentage of students outside the Avalon. Eighty per cent of students going to vocational schools are from rural areas, while two-thirds of students proceeding to University are from urban areas. Relatively few students from Labrador and the Burin Peninsula

attend university, choosing instead to go either to vocational schools or enter the world of work without further preparation beyond Grade Eleven. Among the regions there are large variations in the proportion of students attempting to enter the labour force after high school graduation; in Labrador, for example, seventy per cent of the students from high school go directly to the labour market in search of jobs, while in the Gander-Bonavista-Grand Falls area only about one-quarter of the students take such a step. Districts in which parents of students had the lowest level of education had much lower participation rates at post-secondary schools than did districts with higher levels of parental education. Generally, during the late seventies over fifty per cent of the Grade Eleven students did not go on to post-secondary education of any kind. In the same period, around thirty per cent of the students sought employment without further education and training. Of the total high school population, over thirty per cent stated that they would not be going to post-secondary education of any type either now or later, either because they felt further education was inaccessible or they felt they must start "earning money now." Where students go is related not only to what places are accessible to them but also to their occupational aspirations and expectations.

The Aspirations and Expectations of High School Students in Newfoundland

An analysis of the aspirations (the occupations students desired) and expectations (those occupations they expected to obtain) of our Newfoundland Grade XI students showed the following:

Aspirations

Group I - Business and Professional - 52%

Group II - Clerical sales, services, transportation - 21%

Group III - Craftsmen - 8%

Group IV - Occupations related to fishing, logging, farming - 2%

Other - Household, etc. - 17%

EXPECTATIONS

Group I - Business and professional - 38%

Group II - Clerical sales, services, transportation - 22%

Group III - Craftsmen - 9%

Group IV - Occupations related to fishing, logging, farming - 14%

Other - Household, etc. - 17%

The wide discrepancy between student occupational aspirations and expectations was explained, for the most part, by

(a) students' perceived lack of opportunity to be accepted to their chosen post-secondary school to pursue studies related to their occupational aspirations;

(b) their perceived difficulty in being able to go to a university to obtain a degree or to be accepted into the College of Trades and Technology;

(c) their perceived sense of futility especially on the part of female students, in seeking further education and training.

If students perceive that there are few opportunities for them to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary for them to pursue the occupations of their choices, and if shortage of places in such institutions as the College of Trades and Technology prevents students from acquiring those skills, then educational planners need to take action.

The Need for Post-Secondary Education and Training in Newfoundland and Labrador

From what is known of the educational and training levels of our workers, it would appear that, generally, the Newfoundland labour force is not well-equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills in this technological age to utilize fully and effectively our abundant resources. This phenomenon shows up dramatically in employment ratios in this Province. Statistics Canada shows that the working-age population (15+) has had since 1965 a 42% chance of being employed. This figure is substantially lower than for Canada as a whole. As one would expect, because employment in a technological age is dependent upon the acquisition of knowledge and skills relevant to the job, there is a very strong correlation between levels of education and employment ratios. Statistics Canada, again, reveals that a Newfoundlander with an elementary education has a 30% chance of employment; one who has successfully completed high school has a 54% chance, while the chances of a Newfoundlander with post-secondary education is over 75%. Of the Newfoundlanders presently unemployed, more than fifty per cent are between fifteen and twenty-four years of age, and the majority of these have never participated in post-secondary education of any kind. If those young people had grown up in Ontario, there is a high probability that they would still be in school of some kind, either secondary or post-secondary.

The educational levels of the labour force in Newfoundland are considerably lower than for Canada as a whole. In this Province, thirty-five per cent have elementary educational levels, while for Canada the percentage is eighteen. Whereas in Newfoundland it is claimed that sixty-five per cent of the labour force have education beyond Grade nine, the figure for Canada is eighty-two percent. While it can be argued that Newfoundlanders have enough education and training for the jobs they do perform, it can be reasoned and argued that the quality of their work would improve if they acquired, through

secondary and post-secondary institutions, more knowledge and skills relevant to the industry in which they are involved.

The second need for post-secondary education is to train our people for those areas of employment where there is an excess demand for skilled workers such as in data processing, computer data entry, computer operations, word processing, nursing, physiotherapy, medical laboratory technology, electrical power transmission, navigation, marine technology, fish processing, etc. Whereas (according to the data), we do train an excess of welders, sheet metal workers, nursing assistants, rough carpenters and deck hands, our post-secondary institutions have barely touched on knowledge and skill development related to our own basic industries such as proper handling, processing and marketing of the produce from the sea. In these areas, students will have to learn to apply their knowledge of chemistry, biology, and other physical sciences to make Newfoundland sea products renowned in the markets of the world.

What Needs to be Done

First of all, we must establish a good basic, comprehensive high school program that will accommodate every student in this Province. Secondly, we must decide on what we expect post-secondary education to do for our people. Thirdly, we must take the initiative in developing programs that will give students the expertise to deal with our resources. Fourthly, we must convince our youth of the necessity to continue their education and training. Fifthly, we must expand all of our post-secondary institutions - the University, the College of Trades and Technology, the College of Fisheries, the nursing schools, and community colleges so that all of our qualified students seeking admission can be accepted. Finally, we need to coordinate the work of all the post-secondary institutions in the Province so that our students will be provided with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to prosper in their chosen field of work.